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ABSTRACT

This review of the research on the role of television in family life considers television both as a medium for which the specific content matters little, and as a source of content, i.e., a purveyor of messages about physical and social life. Television viewing is discussed as an activity in which family members participate and about which they make decisions; television content is seen to be a source of ideas and a prod to the explication of family values. It is suggested that technological innovations will accentuate several of television's roles in family life. A 40-item bibliography is attached. (Author/MER)

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TELEVISION'S ROLE IN FAMILY LIFE

by

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Television's Role in Family Life
Paper presented at the meetings of the American Psychological Association
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When television appeared in the 1950's, its potential social impacts were not the subject of much research, but they were widely discussed. Except for a few dissidents and doomsayers, it was generally hailed as a godsend to the American family. It would keep family members at home. It would bring them together around the set in a close circle of enjoyment and interaction. It would bring them education and high class entertainment. Now, several decades later, part of the vision has become reality. Television has become part of family life, it is in virtually every home, and it is on about seven hours a day. Now we are more likely to decry its presence than to welcome it, but we still have little hard evidence what it actually means for family life.

In discussing television's role in family life, I will consider it both as a medium--for which the specific content matters little--and as a source of content--a purveyor of messages about physical and social life. I will discuss television viewing as an activity in which family members participate and about which they decide and television content as a source of ideas and as a prod to the explication of family values. Finally, I will suggest that technological innovations will accentuate several of televison's roles in family life.

State of Television Research

Research about television has burgeoned in the past decade. Three comprehensive bibliographies published between 1971 and 1980 illustrate this. A bibliography compiled for the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior and published in 1971 (Atkin, Murray, & Nayman, 1971) listed only 285 core citations. A bibliography compiled in 1975 (Comstock & Fisher, 1975) added nearly 900 new citations. The most recent bibliography, which is less than a year old (Murray, 1980), contains nearly 3,000 citations, 60% of which were published between 1975 and 1980. It was the compiler of this last bibliography who noted--undoubtedly wearily--the enormous growth in research in this area.

Most research represented in these bibliographies examines television content, people's viewing patterns, and content effects on individuals' information, attitudes, beliefs, and actions. Audiences are generally treated as isolated atoms struck with television's bullets of content. Rarely is there explicit recognition that television is viewed and has its effects in a social context. Where the family context is recognized at all, it is likely to be in one of three forms: older siblings and parents influencing viewing patterns, parents modulating the effects of viewing specific television content, and children initiating interactions with parents because of what they have seen on television (e.g., commercial advertising). Family perspectives,

especially any view of families as systems, are plainly limited in existing television research. Thus, this paper will draw on existing work, but it will not be bound by it as television's roles in the family as a medium and as content are examined.

Television as a Medium

Television as a medium may play several roles in the family. It may be another, unwitting participant in family interaction. It may help to regulate and demarcate family routines. Viewing it may be an opportunity for various forms of family interaction. Its content and the regulation of viewing may be topics of conversation among family members. Each of these four roles represents an opportunity for the television medium, largely regardless of content, to influence family life.

Thinking of television as a participant in family interaction requires recognizing it as a source of interesting sounds, words, and sights, most of them relating to human interaction. Usually it brings other people and their activities into the household. In the average family it supplies these additional household members about seven hours a day. It brings them into the family's communal spaces, the living area, living room, den, or family room (LoSciuto, 1972; Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a,b). Among those families with second and third sets, it brings them into bedrooms.

The family television set is turned on about seven hours a day, but the average household member watches no more than about 3-1/2 hours a day. So for each family member, television programming functions as background several hours a day. Indeed, the common view of children, adolescents, or adults staring like zombies at the television set is more wrong than right (Anderson, Alwitt, Lorch, & Levin, 1979; Bechtel, Achelpohl, & Akers, 1972; Krull & Husson, 1979; LoSciuto, 1972; Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a). Viewers more often than not come in and out of the room, eat, read, talk, carry out chores, and study while "watching" television. It has been estimated that adults watch from beginning to end not more than about 60% of programs they report viewing (LoSciuto, 1972). Similar conclusions may be drawn for children and adolescents, although the measures are different (Bechtel et al., 1972; Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a; Murray, 1972).

So television is background nearly as much as it is foreground. But it is distracting background, because it provides interesting human speech and activity. It dilutes, interrupts, and delays interactions among family members. When a soap opera is broadcast, a mother may not discipline a child so she can hear what the gay divorcee is trying to explain to the mayor's son. When the baseball game is broadcast, my husband may turn away at a critical point in our discussion to see the replay of Fred Lynn's extravagant catch and fall. Television functions for many family members' interactions rather like my two-year-old functions for interactions among my husband, twelve-year-old, and me--an intriguing, uncontrollable interruption in ongoing activity.

In addition to being a distracting participant in family interaction, television can function as a regulator of it (Lull, 1980). Meal times and bed times are determined by program scheduling. Visits with friends and relatives are scheduled around favorite programs. A dinner party can begin after the evening news but not before. Baths are sandwiched between Sesame Street and The Electric Company so that there are easily marked transition points into--as Sesame Street ends--and out of--as The Electric Company begins--the tub.

A third way television as a medium may function is as a setting for interaction. In single set homes as much as half of all viewing is with the entire family (Bower, 1973). Despite the fact that most households have more than one operating television set, much viewing is still done with other family members. It has been reported that Nielsen figures show that 70% of prime time viewing in 1975 involved both adults and children and that this figure did not change much from 1971 to 1975, a period in which many households acquired at least one extra set (Robertson, 1979). Similar data suggest that co-viewing by adults and children is much less (20%) on Saturday morning, the traditional kidvid hours. Other data suggest that solitary viewing time, at least after the preschool years, increases as children get older (Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a,b). Overall, however, the majority of viewing by children and adolescents still occurs with other family members present. Moreover, work with American adults suggests that fully two-thirds of all viewing occurs with other family members (LoSciuto, 1972), and cross-national studies of changes in time use with introduction of television indicate that the minutes spent with spouse, with children, and with both increase with the introduction of television into the household (Robinson, 1972).

Having established that most television viewing occurs with other family members, perhaps we should agree with the sages who earlier predicted that television would bring family members together around the set in a close circle of enjoyment and interaction. But is there interaction? We cannot be sure about quantity or quality, but we can be sure it occurs. Television seems to be used as a device for facilitating social interaction (Nordenstreng, 1970). Viewing can be a time for physical contact (Brody, Stoneman, & Sanders, 1980; Lull, 1980). People talk to each other while they watch. In one study, among sixth and tenth graders who reported ever watching television with other family members more than 80% said they talked some of the time television was on and nearly 20% said they talked much of the time (Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a). About half the talk was about television, but the rest was about other things. Another study indicated conversations occurred during 40% of the programs viewed (LoSciuto, 1972). The cross-national time use studies show slight increases in family conversations with the introduction of television (Robinson, 1972). Television provides a communal family experience (Katz & Foulkes, 1962). So, television viewing serves quite often as an opportunity for interaction, conversation, and physical intimacy among family members.

Finally, television provides topics for conversations occurring at times other than while viewing. Although most people report watching television primarily for relaxation and enjoyment (rather than edification), they still find that it provides plenty to talk about. Program content

is discussed--what happy families are like--or use of the medium is discussed--what to watch, when to watch, how long to watch. Television was sometimes or often a topic of conversation among parents and their teenage children for about half the teenagers in one large sample (Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a). Its content fell about eighth in the list of topics adolescent boys and girls said they discussed with their parents. Control of viewing is also a topic of conversation, but less often than one might imagine (Dorr, 1978; McLeod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn, & Fallis, in press). During co-viewing time family members jointly determine what to watch, but the decisionmaking does not seem to count for much in the family. Predictably, the person most influencing viewing choices is the person with the most power among the participating family members (Lull, 1978). Older siblings choose more often than younger ones; the dominant adult chooses more than the subordinant adult; parents choose more than children (Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a,b; Lull, 1978).

Four roles which television as a medium can play in family life have now been described. It has been suggested that television may serve as a disruptive participant in family interaction, as a regulator of family interaction, as a context for interaction, and as a facilitator of interaction. So prevalent and frequently used a medium as television obviously ought to be included in assessments of family interaction and dynamics. The preceding discussion has indicated ways in which it might be included, but more systematic, fine-grained data and more of a systems view of the family are needed before television's roles are very well understood. Once understood, an entirely new level of analysis will be necessary in order to understand the positive and negative contributions the medium makes to family life. Such a valuation of the medium cannot, of course, be completed without also considering the content it purveys, the topic to which we now turn.

Television as a Source of Content

Television has most often been explored as a purveyor of content. Opportunities abound to draw from existing research to explore its role as content in family life. Because much television research has looked at influence and inculcation processes separately for different types of content, one could discuss television and families and -- sex roles, voting, political beliefs, occupational aspirations, racial attitudes, self concept, prosocial behavior, aggressive behavior, sexual activity, consumerism, and more (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978; Liebert, Neale, & Davidson, 1973; Roberts & Bachen, 1981). One could, but I will not. I will eschew a look at specific roles, attitudes, and behaviors which may be influenced by television and limit the discussion to television as another social influence or socialization agent, an agent provocateur, and as a spur to the elucidation of norms. Depending on one's perspective, even these three topics are one in the same.

Television programming being what it is and television viewing patterns being what they are, most of what people see on television deals with American life in ways which permit viewers to generalize from it to their own lives. Viewers are presented with examples of how women behave, how spouses argue, what it is like to be a police officer, what

motivates people to work, how one changes someone's mind, and so on. Thus, television content provides family members with a set of detailed "instructions" about important social roles and social situations. In one of the common par. nces of the day, it provides scripts for many aspects of daily life a. significant life events (Abelson, 1981; Janis, 1980). Looked at from another social psychological perspective, television can function to inculcate or change attitudes or behavior, following many of the principles and paradigms laid down over many decades by social psychologists.

Most analysts claim television's instructions and scripts are stereotyped toward the traditional upper middle class white norms of American society (Gerbner & Gross, 1980; Tuchman, Daniels, & Benet, 1978; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977, 1979. When its messages match up with those espoused by the family or individual family members, be it upper middle class whites or not, television can enhance the family inculcation and/or maintentance of those values and norms. Television becomes one more social influence for family members. When they do not match up, television content serves as an "agent provocateur" in the family.

Black leaders of the 60's are reported to have implicated television in inner city riots. It showed poor people another, more desirable lifestyle but told nothing about how to get it except by theft, looting, and the like. Immigrant men from more traditional cultures are reported to resent the ideas their wives and children obtain from television (and the rest of society, of course) about independence, dress, dating, and shared household responsiblity. In a recent national survey, 14% of parents viewed television as a major societal influence which made it hard to raise children (ranking 11th, with the most frequently mentioned influence endorsed by 34% of parents) and 26% viewed the "gimmes" induced by television advertising as a major nagging problem (ranking 4th, with the most frequently mentioned problem endorsed by 32% of parents) (Yankelovich, Clark, & Martire, 1977).

A potential positive consequence of television's agent provocateur role is spurring the elucidation of family norms. When television interjects into the family ideas and values with which at least some family members disagree, these members are likely to clarify their norms for other family members and in some cases to assert their supremacy. Two examples will illustrate this. One deals with norms defining child pornography. Soon after we moved to Los Angeles, a news broadcast described a child pornography ring. The district attorney had charged several men with inducing children to perform acts which "some would call lewd." Having read in the newspaper what some of these acts were, my husband and I were both prompted by the newscast to clarify our norms for child pornograhy. A second example deals with norms for female and male roles. Iranian adolescent males who moved here recently caused quite a stir in their household when they wanted to help cook, clear the table, and wash dishes -- all traditional female roles in Iran. The grandmother was outraged at having menin the kitchen. The father was wary of what it boded for him. The boys insisted. Their intention to adopt American norms, as they said they had seen them on television, provoked a heated examination of each family member's sex role norms.

When families have clear norms, it apparently mitigates considerably the impact of different norms presented on television. For example, it has been shown that children's intentions to buy sugared or sugarless gum following an advertisement for either product depend primarily on family norms for which gum may be chewed and on children's awareness of these norms (Esserman, 1981). Other studies have shown that evaluative commentaries by an adult co-viewing with children or other adults enforce the adult's norms rather than those espoused explictly or implicitly by the programming (Corder-Bolz & O'Bryant, 1978; Grusec, 1973; Hicks, 1968; Lefcourt, Barnes, Parke, & Schwartz, 1966). Still other studies have shown adult mediation after viewing to be at least partially effective in mitigating content effects (Clancy-Hepburn, Hickey, & Neville, 1974; Prasad, Rao, & Sheikh, 1978; Ward & Robertson, 1970; Ward & Wackman, 1972). Presumably, most families have experiences like these with the efficacy of asserting their norms. Such experiences should reinforce the processes of asserting, clarifying, and inculcating norms in families. In this way, television may contribute positively -- after first serving as the agent provocateur -- to the development and maintenance of family norms.

Because most Americans watch program content that relates to their intellectual and social life, there are innumerable opportunities for it to contribute to family processes of establishing, maintaining, and changing norms, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. It has been suggested here that television content may immediately assist the family in these activities by transmitting ideas congruent with those of the family or that, at least in the short run, it may cause difficulties by transmitting ideas in conflict with those in the family. However, even such an introduction of conflict into the family -- which is bemoaned by most parents -- can be beneficial if it stimulates the establishment and/or clarification of family values. How much television content plays any of these three roles and how much the roles differ depending on the content area or the family or the community are issues which remain to be explored. Certainly, they are worth exploring. Exactly how the issues are formulated ought to be influenced by one's views of the future of television.

Technological Change

Some people argue that any discussion of television, and certainly any formulation of research to be done about television, is virtually worthless because television is not long for this world (Tannenbaum & Gibson, 1980). They recite a litany of technological innovations: narrowcasting, over-the-air subscription television, one- and two-way cable systems, direct broadcast satellites, videodisc and videocassette, improved UHF broadcasting, videotex, microcomputers, and computer-video systems for the home. They know that another brave new world is upon us. I am not so visionary a social scientist, but it is appropriate -- especially with APA meeting in avant garde Los Angeles -- to point to changes that are taking place.

Technology is bringing many more broadcast outlets to us, providing more opportunities to control what and when we view, beginning to integrate print with video, and starting to permit interactive video systems sometimes with print. Such innovations are usually adopted slowly and

incompletely, but they are coming. They have implications for the role of media in family life. For awhile there will only be one "set" for the family -- the two-way cable system, the satellite receiver, or the computer system. There will be even more content to choose from. There may be voting and shopping and mail by video and computer combinations. There will be more reasons to stay home and fewer reasons to engage in social life outside the home. There will be more entertainment available in the home and more access to an idealized upper middle class adult world. There will be more diverse messages about the world and its inhabitants. There will be more pornography, more religion, more ethnicity, maybe even more farm news.

If we choose to examine television's role in family life and we believe that these technologically-driven changes will come about reasonably soon, we can choose either or both of two paths. First, explore those aspects of television which are likely to transfer to other upcoming technological systems in the home. Or, second, contrast aspects of television with what is different in the oncoming systems. Either approach should help us understand the role of television in the social psychological life of the family.

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